Blessed Are You
February 6, 2011

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Psalm 112:1–9
Matthew 5:1–10

Jesus was different. In the communities he created, from his ragtag band of followers to the varied groups with whom he set down to dinner, he would welcome anybody. . . . No one ever went away hungry when they came to eat with Jesus. The excluded were those who excluded themselves.

William Placher

I can't begin to say how grateful I am to be back among my congregation and in this pulpit on Sunday morning.

Nor can I find the words to express my gratitude to the Personnel Committee and the Session and to you, the people of the church, for a leave of absence that allowed me to be with Sue during her recent illness.

She continues to improve—enough that she is even more eager for me to return to work than I am.

And again, for the second time in three months, we both want you to know our gratitude for your prayers and your love and your notes, which sustained us and held us up. In all the years we had never before experienced quite so powerfully the way the grace and love of God are expressed through the kindness and prayers and love of people.

So thank you, thank you, thank you, and thanks be to God.

. . .

You have startled us this week, merciful God, with the power of nature, and this morning again with snow that brings our city, its streets and tall

buildings and sidewalks, and its people into sharp focus. Now startle us again with your truth; open our hearts and minds to the word you have for us today: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

A new and controversial book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* by Amy Chua, not only raised eyebrows and not-a-little defensive anger, but also set off a rigorous national conversation about how we raise and educate our children. As I read reviews and monitored how people were reacting to the book and the author's interviews and television appearances, it occurred to me that the conversation was really about a deeper issue, a fundamental issue: namely, what is the purpose of a human life, what is my purpose, your purpose, in Wendell Berry's memorable question he asked in the title of an essay and book, "What are people for?"

Chua's philosophy, expressed in the way she is preparing her daughters for life in the adult world, is that striving for and achieving excellence, being the best, being better than everyone else, is what her daughters are for. And so she forced seven-year-old Lulu to practice her violin for hours, right through dinner into the night with no breaks for food, water, bathroom until she could play "The Little White Donkey" perfectly; rejected a homemade birthday card because she deserved better. When her older daughter, Sophia, acted disrespectfully, Chua called her "garbage" and remembered that that was what her father called her once. On the *Today Show,* she said that many Asian parents are shocked at how much time American parents allow their kids to waste: hours on Facebook, playing video games. In fact, the same week the book was published, a report from the International Student Assessment was released that ranked American students seventeenth in reading, twenty-third in science, and thirty-first in math.

Now it turns out that Chua is actually softer and more lenient than her book indicates, and while I found many of her specific practices disturbing, I do appreciate her reminder that we have one life to live, and it is a matter of supreme importance for each of us to have some sense of what we are for, to set our hopes and expectations high, and then give ourselves to them. I suspect I'm not the only one who now remembers with gratitude parental expectations that were considerably higher than what I thought were reasonable at the time and that my parents were willing to make me unhappy with them. "Bobby's parents don't make him study/come home at 9:00; Bobby doesn't have to eat vegetables . . ." "Well, we're not Bobby's parents and you're not Bobby, so eat your brussels sprouts and go do your

homework," they said with monotonous consistency, and that pretty much ended the conversation.

But it's the underlying question that intrigues me: What are people for?

One day, early in their life together, Jesus sat down with his followers to tell them about his hopes and expectations for them. Not long before, each of them had made a monumental decision to walk away from what they were doing to join up with him; which is to say, walked away from the old meaning of their lives—as fisherman, tax collectors, tradespeople. He took them away from the crowds that had begun to gather wherever he went, up on a hillside, and sat down, as a rabbi sits with his students, and the clear purpose of this exercise was to teach them something about the meaning of their lives, what they were for, and beyond and beneath that, God's own agenda for the world, God's hopes and dreams and expectations for them and for all God's children.

He began,

> Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven
> Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted
> Blessed are the meek, . . .
> those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, . . .
> the pure in heart, . . .
> the peacemakers, . . .
> the persecuted.

The Beatitudes: we're not sure what to do with them, are we? Professor of Preaching, Ron Allen remembers seeing them framed and hanging on a parishioner's wall in his first church years ago. Theologian Charles James Cook says he is "struck by their poetic beauty and overwhelmed by their impracticability in our world" (*Feasting on the Word,* Year A, vol. 1, p.308).

Leo Tolstoy, the greatest writer of his time, thought that Christians were to take the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount literally. He concluded, based on his reading of Jesus' admonition to turn the other cheek, that his serious followers would therefore be pacifists and anarchists, because governments conduct wars; that he should be chaste (he came to this conclusion after thirteen children and a robust love life). He concluded that Christians should not marry or own private property. The fine motion picture *The Last Station* portrayed how Tolstoy tried to establish an

alternate world, a commune, in which he and his followers could live out literally the ethic of Jesus in Matthew 5. Reality keeps intruding, however, in his family's desire to keep his considerable estate; his marriage deteriorates, and his followers find it impossible to abide by his standard of sexual abstinence.

The Beatitudes just don't fit with the real world, it seems. Reinhold Niebuhr called them an "Impossible Possibility." Furthermore, "bless-ed" is not a very helpful translation of the Greek. "Bless-ed" is a soft word, sentimental, a little mushy. The Greek is robust: happy—happiness or deep satisfaction, contentment, profound gratitude. "Blessed" is more like it, not "bless-ed."

The late Kurt Vonnegut said one time that if you want to discover the meaning and potential of human life, you might start with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes. "That one about the meek inheriting the earth," Vonnegut said, "is the best idea anyone ever had." He observed that "vocal Christians, often with tears in their eyes, demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. I haven't heard anybody demand that the Beatitudes be posted anywhere," he wrote ("Cold Turkey," *In These Times*).

The reason is that while they are poetically beautiful, they are radically subversive. They challenge, head on, the values and ethical structures of the world in which we live. You don't get ahead in this world by being poor in spirit or poor in anything. In fact the defining value of a consumer culture is to not be poor but to earn, buy, accumulate, consume. The meek don't get anywhere in this world; the aggressive do. Can you imagine a job interview that begins with the applicant saying, "Actually, I'm rather meek"? And peacemakers are not blessed; they are ignored, if they're not being roughed up by bullies in the employment of the powerful.

I was mesmerized and inspired by the demonstrations in Cairo: hundreds of thousands of Egyptians taking a stand against tyranny, peacefully demanding a better life for themselves and a better future for their children and basic human rights, the rights to participate in the important decisions a nation needs to make, extended to all the people, not just the elite. It was, for a while, a powerful but happy event. And it was peaceful. People were smiling, laughing. I was touched by the television pictures of the young couple who brought their children, a little boy and girl, to witness it, to be part of a great moment in their nation's history. The CNN camera caught

them and followed as they walked away from the demonstration to stop for ice cream on the way home. Blessed are the meek, the peacemakers. But then reality intervened. Bullies on horseback apparently hired by the government or its supporters galloped into the crowds, brandishing whips and clubs. People were injured; there was bloodshed and, inevitably, retaliation, throwing rocks and paving stones. We saw that reality in this world is not meekness and mercy, love and peacefulness, but power, strength, and violence.

So why do we hold on to these ideals that are so contrary to the way things work in the world, so vulnerable to the reality of power and violence? Why do we keep repeating them and needlepointing them and preaching sermons about them?

The reason is that we Christians believe they are true, that Jesus was speaking truth when he sat down that day to teach his first followers. We Christians believe that while bullies on horseback may win today, at the end of the day it will be peace and justice and righteousness that will prevail. We Christians believe that there is a reign of God coming into human history, that the long arc of human history is toward freedom and equality and kindness and love. We Christians believe it, even in the face of contrary evidence, bet our lives on it, are willing to be fools for Christ for it, and sometimes suffer and die for it, because he said it and then lived out his own life based on it and died for it: meek, not violent, to the end; loving, not cursing and invoking the wrath of God; and forgiving even the ones who were driving nails through his wrists and ankles and hanging him up to die —the ultimate expression of real power and real meekness, real reality in this world. We Christians believe it and bet our lives on it because death did not defeat him; the power of empire, the power of human hatred, cruelty, bigotry, and intolerance did not prevail on that dark Friday, because three days later there was Easter, resurrection, and the irresistible, ultimate, infinite power of love.

And so the invitation today is to gather around him and to allow him to teach—to teach us that the meaning of human life is radically different from what the world relentlessly tells us. You and I are not ultimately defined by how much we have, how much wealth, power, and influence we have accumulated. We are not defined by how beautiful or handsome or successful we are; we are defined, finally, by how well we love.

You are blessed, he said, when you love enough to become poor in spirit, when you love enough to experience the pain and grief of others; you are blessed when you hunger and thirst for righteousness—that is, when you are so passionate about justice and fairness in the world that you can taste it. You are blessed when you speak up and vote and invest your resources in causes that bring peace to this world, even in the face of derision and insult.

Sometimes life teaches us what it means to be poor in spirit, when out of the blue something happens that reveals how irrelevant all the money, all the professional prestige, all the position and status and privilege is; when you suddenly find yourself unemployed or alone or widowed or sitting in the hospital late at night by the bedside of a dear one with a serious undiagnosed illness, feeling utterly powerless. You are fortunate indeed if there is someone to remind you that Jesus once said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, those who mourn.”

The distinguished novelist, the late Walker Percy, wondered if it is possible for people to miss their lives in the same way one misses a plane and describes a man who “not once in his life had . . . allowed himself to come to rest in the quiet center of himself . . . , not once had . . . been present for his life. So his life passed as a dream (cited by Eugene Peterson, *The Second Coming*).

Jesus didn’t want his friends to miss their lives, so he told them what real life looks like.

He wanted them to know the truth, didn’t want them to sell out to half-truths, no matter how immediately attractive. So he told them God’s truth.

He didn’t want them to waste their one and only life, and so he said,

> Blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful.
> Blessed are people who hunger after integrity and thirst after justice in their community.
> Blessed are people who reach across barriers of race and religion and politics and gender and sexual orientation and theological preference and ecclesiastical history and do the hard work of peacemaking.

We come to church for an hour or two, sing some hymns, listen to a sermon, share the bread and wine of communion, and then go back to what we do in

the world—working, parenting, playing, voting, spending our resources, investing our time, contending with one another, occasionally loving.

May we not forget the intriguing truth Jesus told his friends one day and tells us today.

Blessed . . . are you.

Thanks be to God.